

OFFICIAL APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
17 June 1985

Reagan regains lost political ground

By Charlotte Saikowski
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

Ronald Reagan has bounced back.

As the President sets out again this week to sell his tax-reform package — this time traveling to Indiana and Texas — his political fortunes appear to be picking up after a temporary slump. There may be formidable problems ahead, including a slowing economy, a widening budget deficit, and a lack of progress on arms control.

But for the moment the President has regained some lost ground:

- His tax-reform program is receiving general approval from the American public, though it is not seen as a burning issue and many Americans have little knowledge of its specifics.

- He has won a legislative victory in the House on the controversial issue of aid for the rebels seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

- He has seized the diplomatic high road with his popular decision to abide by the SALT II treaty, without abandoning hard-line options in the future.

- Public-opinion polls show he has high approval ratings for a second-term president.

A month ago the White House was battling negative headlines because of a series of diplomatic and legislative setbacks, including the furor over Mr. Reagan's visit to a German military cemetery. But observers note how quickly he has recovered from the drop in public approval and how skillfully he has dealt with Congress.

The House vote on the Nicaraguan aid issue is a case in point. Reagan was forced to compromise. Military aid to the *contras* is prohibited, and aid cannot be distributed through the Central Intelligence Agency or the Defense Department, as Reagan would have liked. But the House ended up giving him \$27 million in humanitarian aid over the next nine months — a symbolic if not substantive victory for the President.

"He is having to compromise — and most strongly on defense," says Thomas Mann, executive director of the American Political Science Association. "But he does not make it look like a devastating loss when he does."

"It's his political strategy at its best — compromising, and looking as if he did not compromise," says political scientist William Schneider.

Tensions between Congress and a president tend to build in a second presidential term, and Reagan is meeting with the normal political resistance that sets in when a president is no longer reelectable. But because Reagan's popularity in the country remains so high, lawmakers feel under some political constraint. Reagan understands this and uses it well.

"As long as his standing is high, the Congress is restrained from attacking him," says James Sundquist, a presidential scholar at the Brookings Institution. "As soon as he starts to slip in the polls, Congress will desert him and take him on. But he has a marvelous way of turning defeat into victory."

Despite the fact that Congress is playing a stronger role in foreign policy, some diplomatic observers see the pendulum of power swinging back toward the presidency under Reagan.

"President Reagan has in many ways been more skillful in dealing with Congress than his predecessors," says David Newsom, director of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. "In tactical terms he's making the Congress feel uncomfortable on several issues — including failure to provide aid for the *contras*. He has put Congress in the position of seeming to be supporting the communists in Managua and of not turning arms control."

Tax reform will be a big test of Reagan's leadership, however. It's not clear how much political mileage he will get from the reform, which his political strategists seek to make the domestic centerpiece of the second term.

All recent polls show Americans generally support the reform. But when asked what they consider to be the most important economic issues, their response is the budget deficit, the general state of the economy, and unemployment. As for the tax plan itself, it is fairness rather than simplification that voters think is important.

Reagan also does not appear to have hit yet on the right formula for selling the tax package, revising his pitch as he has traveled from one state to another. But White House officials say it takes time to capture the public attention, and the President will keep plugging away. On Wednesday, Reagan will make a speech in Indianapolis, and Friday he travels to Dallas to address the International Lions Club.

The White House still expects the tax package to come to a congressional vote this year. And even if it is loaded with compromises, it will still be deemed a political plus for the President.

Meanwhile, Reagan's standing with the broad public remains high, even though his problems have grown tougher in the second term. According to a Gallup poll, his approval rating dropped from a high 64 percent in late January (an inaugural boost) to 52 percent in mid-April. In mid-May it stood at 55 percent.

Even the temporary decline should be viewed against the steadiness of the long-term trend, opinion analysts say. Reagan has stayed above 50 percent in Gallup polls for the past 27 months. "That's one of the longest trends at that level ever," says an analyst at the American Enterprise Institute.

Most political observers see the health of the economy as the key to Reagan's political fortunes. A significant slowdown of the economy or a worsening of the budget deficit — issues on which the President is playing only a passive role — could quickly alter the public mood.

"The only thing that can derail things is an economic collapse," Dr. Mann says. "There are problems on the horizon and things can blow up. But this is a man who is pretty good at conducting the office."